



Beyond “Christian” to an Ecclesial Peace Witness

When Christian leaders go to government to call for sweeping structural change, we have more integrity and power when we can say: “We are part of Christian communities that are already beginning to live out what we are calling you to legislate.” ... Our call for [peace] has integrity only if there is growing peace and wholeness in our families and churches.

Ron Sider

On the evening of March 16, an elder from my church and I had the immense privilege of joining nearly 3,000 fellow believers in the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. Having been commissioned by our pastors the previous Sunday, we flew to D.C. to represent our congregation at the Christian Peace Witness for Iraq, a gathering to mourn and oppose the violence of war and to prayerfully seek peace in the Middle East. The liturgy was both elegant and powerful in its movement between lament and confession, intercession and outcry. It was a significant expression of ecclesial solidarity—an important break in the remorseful silence of God’s people in America in this day and time, and an experience of church that I will treasure always.

During our march through the snow down Embassy Row to the White House, our ecclesiastical diversity became more noticeable: the panoply of signboards, icons, and slogans of varying tone and political posture; the old guard and the “emergents”; the conservatively dressed and the tattooed. As we passed Vice

President Dick Cheney’s residence at the U.S. Naval Observatory, the clamorous beat of tribal drumming clashed with more soothing repetitions of “Kumbaya.” The less musically inclined chanted their demands for peace. And like the national consulates that lined our walk down Massachusetts Avenue, various denominations (more specifically, their social justice subcommittees), ecumenical societies, and nonviolence movements flew their flags boldly.

While the event achieved its goal as a distinctly Christian peace witness, with church folk from nearly every state in the union, there was a conspicuous lack of congregational presence. By and large, most of the churchgoers we encountered had come to D.C. as an outgrowth of personal conviction (albeit spiritual) rather than representing the collective conscience of their local church. Many of them admitted to having come in spite of their congregation: “We didn’t really tell them that we were coming. We’re here pretty much on our own accord.”

What’s the difference, one might ask—aren’t numbers enough? Let us consider this question. If numbers were enough, then 3,000 would be considered meager at best (dwarfed, for instance, by the following day’s Pentagon protest populated by secular activists), especially considering the over 100 million Americans that claim to attend church weekly. What if, instead, this same motley crew of marchers consisted of a thousand congregational delegations, three parishioners each, representing churches whose communal engagement with the gospel compelled them to publicly register their opposition to the current war? Moreover, what if such gospel-unified proclamation flowed not from a piece of paper but, rather, out of the life of a Christian community that practiced shalom day after day among its members...and non-members?

I am grateful for my pastors who graciously sent me to Washington well aware of my penchant for confronting the powers “out there,” over and against the sins that daily compromise the health and unity of the body of believers. Like the fist-waving activists of the liberal, anti-war city that is San Francisco, I find it much easier to rail at our nation’s militaristic institutions and industries than to repent from the subtle-yet-destructive forms of violence I commit in my relationships within both congregation and kin. My zeal for the church’s prophetic edge proves hollow when I hold brothers and sisters in contempt, deny forgiveness, or simply insulate myself with perpetual busy-ness. I cannot call for disarmament in the world while fortifying walls in my marriage. Nor can I critique, with integrity, a coercive foreign policy when I find myself as a parent angrily coercing, rather than patiently leading, my own children.

From the pulpit, a much-needed word was given to me and to our whole congregation: “You are not called to bear witness to a peace that is composed of the best of human intentions, passion, or rationality, but rather to a peace that is won by Christ alone. Testify with your attitudes, your words, and your conduct the shalom that Christ won by responding to evil not with violence but by the love and forgiveness of his Father in heaven. Go in the peace of Christ that we celebrate at the communion table...and in our life together.” Amen. Let it be so. ■

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